

C.I.A. Is Making A Special Target Of Latin Region

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 3 — United States covert activities in Central America, which began a year ago with limited aims, have become the most ambitious paramilitary and political action operation mounted by the Central Intelligence Agency in nearly a decade, according to intelligence officials.

With more than 150 agents based in Honduras and dozens more in neighboring countries, intelligence sources said, the C.I.A. has devoted a large part of its special operations staff to the Central American effort. Before it began, the C.I.A. had fewer than a dozen paramilitary and political action specialists in the region, the sources said.

Policy Called Unchanged

In Honduras the C.I.A. has indirectly provided money, training and military equipment to paramilitary groups whose avowed aim is the overthrow of the leftist Sandinist Government in neighboring Nicaragua, according to American and Honduran officials familiar with the operations.

That aim differs from the Reagan Administration's declared policy of favoring negotiations with Nicaragua over regional problems.

Administration officials said the American policy toward Nicaragua had not changed. Intelligence officials insisted that the covert operations remained limited in scope and did not involve any effort to overthrow the Sandinist Government.

The Central American operations have caused growing concern in Congress, the Defense Department and the State Department. Some officials fear that the activities may aggravate chronic political instability in the region and lead to eventual direct American military involvement there. They also fear that the efforts of the C.I.A. are dependent on extremist groups it cannot control.

Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, concerned that the Reagan Administration has not kept them fully informed about developments, have asked their chairman, Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, to schedule a hearing with top C.I.A. officials before the end of the month.

At issue is a series of interlocking operations whose target is the Nicaraguan Government.

As originally proposed and approved by President Reagan late last year, the operations called for financing moderate elements in Nicaragua and trying to identify and support Nicaraguan political leaders who could galvanize opposition to the Sandinists.

In addition, the plans anticipated the formation, with the assistance of other Latin American nations, of at least one paramilitary force to interdict arms supplies to guerrillas in El Salvador. The Administration asserted that Cuba and the Soviet Union, with help from Nicaragua, were secretly shipping weapons and ammunition to the Salvadoran insurgents through Honduras.

The plans specifically excluded any effort that involved supporters of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the Nicaraguan leader overthrown by the Sandinists in 1979, and did not contemplate paramilitary operations designed to topple the Sandinist Government.

"There was a very clear understanding in discussions at the National Security Council that it would be counterproductive to work with Somoza supporters," said an Administration official who participated in the discussions.

The architects of the plan, and its main advocates, according to Administration officials, were Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., who resigned this year, Thomas O. Enders, Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, and William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence.

American intelligence officials said there was no link between the C.I.A. and a series of military training camps in Florida and California operated by Cuban and Nicaraguan exile groups. Nicaraguan exile leaders familiar with the anti-Sandinist activities in Central America also denied that the American camps were used for training by the paramilitary groups engaged in the covert operations.

Although the exact nature of the current operations is difficult to determine because of their secrecy and complexity, the C.I.A. has provided money and equipment through intermediaries to paramilitary groups, including former Somoza supporters, that have opened a military offensive inside Nicaragua aimed at destabilizing the Government.

Initially, according to American and Honduran officials, the C.I.A.'s operations were limited. On the political front, the agency's search for a popular, alternative Nicaraguan political leader led quickly to Edén Pastora Gómez, a Sandinist revolutionary hero known as Commander Zero who was living in exile in Costa Rica after a break with the Sandinists last year.

According to American intelligence officials, Mr. Pastora was approached by the C.I.A. through intermediaries and offered financial assistance if he would publically call for the overthrow of the Sandinist Government and organize political opposition.

Exiles Divided on Issue

There are contradictory accounts about whether Mr. Pastora accepted the offer. He has repeatedly denied making any deal with the C.I.A., but several American intelligence officials said they believed an accommodation was reached.

Mr. Pastora's usefulness to the C.I.A., whether or not he was receiving aid from Washington, was marginal because the Nicaraguan exile community was divided on the subject of his leadership.

On the paramilitary front, the C.I.A., with President Reagan's approval, tried funneling aid through other Latin American nations to support the formation and training of armed units in Honduras.

Argentina, which already had close relations with the Honduran military and had been helping train paramilitary forces, became the main conduit for the aid, American intelligence officials said.

The C.I.A. also worked with intelligence and military services in Venezuela and Colombia, according to these officials.

The operations in Honduras are supervised by the American Ambassador, John D. Negroponte, who works closely with senior intelligence officials in Washington, including Mr. Casey of the C.I.A. Mr. Casey visited Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, in May to review the activities, intelligence officials said.

Reliance on the Argentines, however, turned out to be a mixed blessing, according to American intelligence officials. Because the Argentines had long been established in Honduras, they were reportedly somewhat resentful of the sudden American involvement.

Later, after the Reagan Administration threw its support behind Britain in the war over the Falkland Islands, Argentina withdrew many of its military and intelligence officers from Honduras.

More important, the reliance on Argentina drew the United States indirectly into support of paramilitary units that seek to overthrow the Sandinists.